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SUBJECT: MALDIVES BLACKLISTS FOREIGN NATIONALS FOR
SUSPECTED TERRORIST LINKS

REF: USDAO COLOMBO IIR 6 816 0132 05 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) On May 2 Maldivian Foreign Secretary Abdul Hameed Zakariyya met with CDA in Colombo to advise him that the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) had blacklisted eight foreigners, including an apparent American citizen, from entering Maldives because of suspected links to a Maldivian Muslim fundamentalist recently deported from India for attempting to purchase arms (Reftel). When asked for evidence of such links, Zakariyya was unable to provide any, other than (sometimes tenuous) ties to the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), a pro-reform organization opposed to the GORM. Representatives of the MDP and a blacklisted British national who was denied entry to Maldives on April 28 told us that the GORM's current campaign is timed to coincide with the return to Maldives of an MDP activist who had spent several years abroad in self-imposed exile. The GORM has asserted to us before--most recently in the aftermath of civil unrest in August 2004--an MDP connection to Muslim fundamentalists/extremists/terrorists, but thus far remains unable to provide credible evidence to support that claim. We will continue to urge the GORM not to lump advocates of peaceful reform in with those who apparently seek to topple President Gayoom through violent means. End summary.

GORM WATCHLISTS SUSPECT FOREIGNERS

2. (C) In a May 2 meeting with CDA in Colombo, Maldivian Foreign Secretary Abdul Hameed Zakariyya provided additional information on Ibrahim Asif, the Maldivian citizen arrested and deported by Indian authorities in April for allegedly attempting to purchase weapons and explosives in Kerala (Reftel). Zakariyya attempted to link Asif (now in custody in Maldives) and his purported ties with Muslim fundamentalists to exiled members of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), an opposition group not officially recognized in Maldives, and Friends of Maldives (FOM), a UK-based organization that supports democratic reforms in the island state. When asked by CDA if the Government of Republic of Maldives (GORM) had concrete evidence linking these three entities, Zakariyya replied in the negative. The FOM and the MDP are certainly linked, however, he asserted, because a Maldivian national living in UK is the treasurer for both groups. According to Zakariyya, one of these accounts was closed by a UK bank "due to suspicious dealings." (Note: We have known for some time that the MDP and FOM have ties; neither organization makes any attempt to hide the relationship. FOM head David Hardingham and MDP Chairman Mohamed Nasheed were college roommates, and some of the funding sources, especially in FOM's formative stages, are probably the same. Hardingham told us that most of FOM's funds now come from private British citizens. We have no reason to suspect either group of terrorist ties. End note.)

3. (C) Operating on the assumption that all three entities were linked, the GORM has placed eight foreign nationals, including one individual it believes is a U.S. citizen, on a watchlist with the intent of denying them entry to Maldives, Zakariyya reported. Zakariyya identified the U.S. citizen as Nick Grace, the head of a website called ClandestineRadio.com, whom the Foreign Secretary described as a "psychological warfare expert." (In a December conversation with CDA, Chief Government Spokesman Dr. Ahmed Shaheed had also mentioned Grace--although not in the context of blacklisting him--expressing concern that Grace may have helped opposition activists to set up a clandestine radio station.) In addition to Grace, the list includes two Jordanians, two Pakistanis and three British citizens, all of whom are believed to have some connection to either Asif, the MDP or FOM. As a result, Zakariyya added, British citizen and FOM head David Hardingham had already been barred from entering the country on April 28 (see para 5 below).

4. (C) Zakariyya offered several reasons for the GORM's

decision to deny Hardingham entry. First, he said, Hardingham was coming to Maldives to distribute tsunami aid collected in the UK through FOM's own network, bypassing the GORM's tsunami fund. The Foreign Secretary said he thought that initiative was inappropriate, as the GORM wants to track all aid distributed to ensure it reaches those most in need. Zakariyya also claimed that Hardingham knew the editor of a UK-based web magazine, the Dhivehi Observer, which had put out an editorial last December implying that President Gayoom should be killed. (Note: The Dhivehi Observer is an anti-government website that often publishes extreme views. Its editor, a UK citizen of Maldivian extraction, is a council member of the MDP but has no connection to FOM. End note.) He also provided the text of an e-mail purportedly sent by Hardingham to several Maldivian associates in September opining that the British government was unlikely to be interested in events in Maldives unless there were "a lack of stability affecting the financial equilibrium or international security--like fundamentalist terrorism." The message went on speculate that "the threat of (President) Gayoom providing fertile ground for fundamentalism" might "stir" the UK's interest.

15. (C) Charge told Zakariyya that the U.S. takes terrorism issues seriously and is following up on the information the GORM has provided on Asif. At the same time, the U.S. is skeptical about assertions that the MDP and groups like FOM were linked to violence and terrorism. Charge cautioned Zakariyya to be very careful about making such assertions without adequate basis.

MDP, FOM SEE GORM PLOT

16. (C) On May 3 poloff met with Mohamad Latheef, the head of the MDP who lives in self-imposed exile in Sri Lanka, his daughter Jennifer Latheef and FOM head David Hardingham, a British national. Hardingham confirmed that he had been barred from entering Maldives April 28 (when transiting Colombo en route from London to Male, he was informed by Sri Lankan Airlines that the GORM had requested he not be permitted to board the onward flight). He expressed concern that the GORM might also have listed him on an Interpol or other international watchlist, citing a May 1 statement from a Government Spokesman that Hardingham was under investigation for involvement with "a fundamentalist Islamic group."

7 (C) Strenuously denying any link to Muslim fundamentalists, terrorists or arms smugglers, the Briton said that he suspects that the real reasons for his blacklisting are his support for democratic reform in Maldives, his human rights activities and his reluctance to use GORM channels for tsunami aid distribution. (Hardingham said he had registered a charity, Maldives Aid, in the UK after the tsunami. The charity has provided 100 tons of food, medicine, clothing, kitchen utensils and school supplies directly to tsunami victims.) In fact, he asserted, his primary reason for traveling to Maldives was to work out with GORM authorities the distribution of the last remaining container of relief items. The previous shipment, which contained buckets of school supplies, toys and books hand-packed by British children, was held up by Maldivian customs officials because one bucket contained a book with Christmas pictures in it; the delay cost the charity a significant sum, Hardingham said. He remarked ruefully on the irony of the GORM alleging his connection to Islamic fundamentalists, noting that in the past he has had to fight GORM accusations of being a Christian missionary. He speculated that his recent efforts to draw international attention to the March 9 death in police custody of Muaviyath Mahmoodh, a young Maldivian detained on Dhoonidhoo Island on drug offenses, and the alleged torture by police of another detainee, had also provoked GORM ire.

18. (C) Latheef and Hardingham speculated that the April 24 arrest of Ibrahim Asif in India and the subsequent and highly publicized blacklisting of Hardingham were timed to coincide with--and thus overshadow--the April 30 return to Maldives of MDP chairperson Mohamed Nasheed after several years of self-imposed exile in the UK (where he obtained asylum) and Sri Lanka. The publicity surrounding Nasheed's plans to return--including his own press releases announcing those plans--gave the GORM ample opportunity to set up the whole "arrest" of Asif in advance--perhaps even with the complicity of the Indian government, Latheef suggested--and then fabricate links between the MDP and the arms smuggler to discredit the pro-democracy group. Publicizing a purported terrorist plot against the government could be "a diversionary tactic" to deflect international attention from GORM human rights abuses and the growing clamor for democratic reforms, Latheef and Hardingham charged.

19. (C) The GORM clearly feels threatened by Nasheed's popularity, Latheef asserted, and fears his attempts to

organize the MDP at home will be successful. (Note: Nasheed was expected to open an MDP office in Maldives this week. End note.) Thousands of people greeted Nasheed on his return, Latheef claimed, alleging that GORM "thugs," armed with iron bars, had attempted unsuccessfully to provoke a violent incident. Echoing some of Hardingham's comments, Latheef noted that the GORM tries to discredit the MDP to Maldivian audiences by depicting the group as Christians (indeed, an anti-MDP website run by President Gayoom's son depicts Nasheed wearing a papal mitre) and to western audiences as Islamic fundamentalists. Although the GORM has not harassed Nasheed so far, Latheef acknowledged, he is nonetheless sure the GORM is "gearing up" again to repress and arrest pro-reform activists as it did in August--and will use evidence of an anti-Gayoom-cum-fundamentalist plot as justification.

10. (C) Both Latheef and Hardingham denied knowing Asif, who had reportedly been living in Sri Lanka in the northwestern district of Puttalam. Latheef acknowledged that Asif had worked three years ago in a clothing shop Latheef owns in a northern atoll but said Asif was fired by the manager for incompetence after just a few weeks. Asif had also worked for a while as a manager at an agricultural company owned by Nasheed's father, he admitted, but was fired from there as well. Maldivian society is so small that it is easy to find some kind of connection between individuals, Latheef concluded.

COMMENT

11. (C) The Embassy has had no contact with Nick Grace and has no information on his citizenship. We will attempt to contact him and tell him we understand he is on a GORM watchlist. In late summer/early autumn of 2004 Latheef and Nasheed had told us that MDP wanted to set up an opposition radio broadcast but did not identify Nick Grace or any other American as offering or providing assistance. A quick check of www.clandestineradio.com suggests that the site tracks opposition radio broadcasts from all over the world but does not suggest that the group assists in setting up these broadcasts. Nick Grace is listed on the homepage as "Washington Managing Editor." The site's section for Maldives lists Minivan Radio, its short-wave frequencies, time of broadcast, and listener critiques of the quality of transmission. The sole "newsclip" for Minivan Radio posted on the site is a report on tsunami relief originally posted on BBC's website. Although the site's "intel" section names Friends of Maldives as the broadcast's sponsor, Hardingham denied any ownership, telling us that MDP operates Minivan Radio.

12. (C) Comment (cont.): The combined total land mass of Maldives seems hardly large enough to accommodate the elaborate conspiracy theories and counter-theories depicted by the GORM and its opponents. If true, Asif's reported attempts to smuggle arms and explosives into Maldives are an obvious cause for concern, and the GORM has a responsibility to investigate. We remain unconvinced, however, that there is any link between possible Islamic fundamentalists/terrorists on the one hand and MDP and FOM on the other. Nothing Zakariyya was able to tell us suggests the GORM has any such evidence either. We hope Latheef's accusation that the government is "gearing up" to suppress reform is unfounded. GORM decisions to hold the People's Majlis elections so soon after the tsunami and to allow Nasheed to return unharassed to Maldives would seem to suggest the contrary. That said, the GORM's attempts to demonize its critics is a discouraging reversion to tired old tactics we had hoped the government had abandoned. We will continue to press the GORM to move ahead on the road to reform. (An update on political reform efforts follows septel.) We will also continue to tell the GORM that the U.S. is eager to cooperate on cases of suspected terrorism (as that of Mr. Asif would appear to be) but not interested in unsubstantiated assertions that the MDP and similar groups support terrorism and violence.
ENTWISTLE